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FILE

# American in Iran loses wallet, finds kindness

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Mashhad, Iran

**C**ROWDS thronged at the great shrine of Imam Reza, the foremost Muslim pilgrimage site in Iran.

As I stood absorbed in the scene, someone in the crowd jostled me. I glanced down in horror to see a few shreds of plastic dangling from my wrist — all that remained of the bag containing my essentials for travel: passport, travelers checks, airplane ticket, and every penny I possessed.

A skilled thief had reached under my all-enveloping *chador* and swiftly extracted the catch of the year — a United States passport, which sells for 2 million rials (\$22,000) on the black market in Iran.

A village woman sympathetically took my hand and led me to the shrine's *komiteh*, or revolutionary committee. The *komiteh*, a key local organization of postrevolutionary Iran, is staffed by Pasdaran (revolutionary guards).

I felt a little nervous, having heard that even in the Shah's time a foreigner who lost his passport could be imprisoned. Now, under Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic regime, Americans were Public Enemy No. 1, and there was no US Embassy to issue new papers.

That day in particular, anti-American sentiments were strong. Many of the visitors to the shrine were mourning loved ones killed in the war with Iraq, an enemy which many Iranians see as backed by the United States. The bodies of the latest *shahids*, or martyrs, from the nearly five-year-old Iran-Iraq war had just arrived from the front, accompanied by processions of grieving relatives and friends.

Yet I was treated extremely well. At the shrine's *komiteh* office, a tiny, elderly woman Pasdar, bundled in a *chador* that covered everything but the rim of her glasses, was led in.

"Tell me what's the matter, dear," she said sympathetically as she sat me down.

The chanting of dirges over the shrine's loudspeaker was promptly interrupted with an announcement that an American woman's passport had been stolen. I imagined the crowd wondering what an American was doing in Iran's most holy pilgrimage spot.

The *komiteh* members suggested I return the next day to see if my possessions were turned in. Then they invited me to lunch.

The next morning, I was led into the recesses of the *komiteh* office, passing prison cells where apprehended opium addicts and pickpockets languished. In keeping

with their duties as guardians of social behavior, the Pasdaran are vigilant in ferreting out citizens involved with drugs. Addicts are sent to hospital for rehabilitation. Drug dealers are often hanged publicly.

Young Pasdaran in smart khaki uniforms hurried by, many casting curious glances or shy, sympathetic smiles in my direction. Apparently everyone had heard my story.

My escort led me to a curtained-off room where sev-

eral other women Pasdaran were eating breakfast between shifts. Both male and female officers constantly patrol the shrine, keeping an eye out for pickpockets taking advantage of the masses of pilgrims who mill through the shrine at all hours of the day and night.

My translator told me that all the Pasdaran at the shrine were volunteers who had chosen to devote their time to the service of Islam. The women immediately poured tea for me with welcoming smiles and offered some of their meal. They clucked in sympathy when they heard my tale.

We were then informed by a discreet knock on the door by a male Pasdar that the "Commander of the Holy Shrine Post-Revolutionary Committee" — a senior cleric — would receive me. My translator scrutinized me to make sure not one lock of hair was showing out of my *chador* and led me out.

I was ushered into the office of a bearded man in long brown and white robes and a white turban who sat behind a desk, talking alternately into a telephone receiver at each ear and scrawling with a pen. Pictures of all the regime's leaders were displayed on the walls and under the glass desktop. The commander received us graciously, ordered breakfast, and smilingly quizzed me as to which of the 12 imams was the shrine's patron, Imam Reza (he was the eighth).

He said that he had just spoken with Imam Khomeini's personal representative in Mashhad about my case. It was decided that, even though as an American I was technically the *dushman* or enemy, they would give me 40,000 rials (\$440) to compensate my losses in their shrine. "As Muslims, we follow our religion, which says we must treat all people generously," he said.

I was impressed, reflecting that had I lost my money in any other country, the government would never consider itself responsible for reimbursing me. If a foreigner's money was stolen in San Francisco and he went to a police station, he could hardly expect to be reimbursed.

My being an American woman — two evils rolled into one — apparently didn't put everyone off entirely. One day a Pasdar officer took my translator aside and talked in low tones. She came over and whispered in my ear. I expected to be told in the polite Persian way to lower my *chador* further over my face.

Instead, she said earnestly, "There is a tall handsome Revolutionary Guard who has seen you in the shrine and wants to marry you. Do you accept?"

I started to chuckle at the idea of being able to make such an important decision so quickly before I realized how impolite it sounded. The Pasdaran were watching me expectantly. I begged off, explaining I didn't want to be married right now.

Outside the shrine, people stopped me on the streets of Mashhad to offer words of solace. At the local bakery, the sympathetic owners refused payment for my bread.

I returned to the *komiteh* for several days, as the head cleric tried to help me figure out how to resolve my passport and plane ticket problems. Things moved

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slowly, since work stopped at 11, when everyone broke off for prayers and lunch and then left for home. Eventually, I got a letter to explain my lack of travel documents if questioned. Emblazoned with the *komiteh's* seal, it certified that "Miss Festinal" (the closest they could get to my name) "had lost all of her possessions at the Holy Shrine Post." In Iran, that was better than any passport.

*This is the second of several articles by an American writer who recently spent three months in Iran. The writer's name is being withheld to protect her future travel to the area. Two more articles in the series, examining the role of religion in politics and daily life will appear tomorrow and Wednesday.*